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HUMAN GEOGRAPHY OF FRANCE: A REVIEW*

As Vidal de la Blache's well-known "Tableau de la géographie de la France" formed the introduction to Lavisse's great co-operative history of France, the work under review will constitute, when completed, the introduction to a new co-operative "Histoire de la Nation Française" now appearing under the editorial direction of Gabriel Hanotaux. This first volume of the "Géographie humaine de la France" is a large, imposing, clearly printed tome, full of diagrammatic maps and tasteful sketches in black and white and in color. Written in a free, discursive style, it fulfills—so far as it alone is concerned—the promise of Hanotaux in his introductory remarks to the series as a whole, that a departure was to be made from Germanic methods which encumber the reader with the mechanism of scholarship and overwhelm him with "the details of research and the chicanery of discussion." The reader is to be served only with the matured results of long, deliberate, and careful study of authorities in their respective fields. This is certainly true of Brunhes' book; it is a work characteristic of French scholarship. Couched in popular form, readable and inspiring to the novice in the subject, it is at the same time a profound and original contribution to scientific literature.

Americans have for some time been familiar with the "Human Geography" of Jean Brunhes; as its subtitle reads in the English translation, "an attempt at a positive classification; principles and examples." The new work is the logical application to a specified territory of the broad principles outlined in the "Human Geography," for the latter certainly made no claim to be more than an outline of method and was in no sense intended to pose as a complete manual of a vast subject. In both books we cannot fail to be struck by the author's broad scholarship, his command of the literature of geology, history, anthropology, and geography, his able mustering of a mass of detail, and, at the same time, his originality of thought and vivid picturesqueness of style. If now and then we are a little stupefied by his Gallic flights of rhetoric, we are delighted on nearly every page by the incisive turns of phrase expressing complex and difficult ideas, the neatness of which has justified us, we hope, in giving way in this review to a frequent temptation to quote.

Gabriel Hanotaux says that the historical point of view changes from generation to generation and that each successive generation must write its own history of France. This is also true of the geography of France (or of any other dynamic country, for that matter). To be convinced of this, let us but compare the learned compilations of facts given in the books of Malte-

* Jean Brunhes: *Géographie humaine de la France*, Vol. I (forming, with "Introduction Générale" (LXXX pp.), Tome I of Gabriel Hanotaux, edit.: *Histoire de la Nation Française*, 15 vols.). 495 pp.; maps, ills. Société de l' Histoire Nationale, Plon-Nourrit & Cie., Paris, 1920.

Brun and Elysée Reclus with the analytical volumes of Vidal de la Blache and Brunhes. But Brunhes does not reduplicate the work of his teacher, Vidal de la Blache, the great apostle of regional geography, the founder and inspirer of a new and vital French school. The pupil to a large extent abandons the strictly regional method, partly on principle, as we shall see, and partly because in doing so he is given a free field for the synthesis of many observations and ideas which a strict adherence to regional description would have made difficult, if not impossible.

The "Géographie humaine de la France" is divided into six parts of which only the first two fall into the present volume. The first part is entitled "General geography, the permanent framework and the human factor." By "permanent framework" is meant the geologic and physiographic structure of the country (*l'architecture du pays*), its climate, and its river courses, which may rightly be regarded as permanent and unchanging so far as man is concerned. But, while Brunhes devotes separate chapters to developing the subject of man's natural environment, he constantly keeps this environment in view when interpreting the facts of human geography. He remarks humorously: "Geology and morphological topography are not *hors d'œuvres* which geographers must treat in one or two chapters as a sop to their consciences." Though he stresses the idea that human geography is never static, but constantly changing, he considers that the type of people composing the French nation, as well as certain human institutions, have acquired a sort of relative permanency. Hence he includes also in the first part of his book chapters on the origins of the French population, and on place names, languages, and dialects.

The second part, entitled "First principles of regional geography," is a study of the various natural, human, and administrative regions into which France has been, is, and might be divided; of provinces and *pays*, regions characterized by divers forms of habitation, by various groupings of habitations in relation to each other; and (in the Epilogue) of ideal political and economic regions.

Political and economic geography in their wider scope, social and economic life, and demography are subjects reserved for the second volume.

Throughout the book Brunhes sounds a note of warning against all seductively simple explanations and deductions. An apparently obvious relationship will not seem so obvious, and a broad generalization will not seem so safe, when the facts are examined in detail and critically weighed. Many years ago Dufrenoy and Élie de Beaumont explained, in terms which have become almost classic in French geography, a supposed antithesis between the Massif Central and the Paris Basin. The Cantal, placed in the center of the Massif Central, they styled the *pole of repulsion* of France, away from which the rivers of nature and the streams of human life alike took their course as if repelled by the convex slope and general inhospitality of the ground. Paris, on the other hand, in the concave hollow of the Paris Basin, they termed the *pole of attraction*, the center of population and of

civilization towards which all things converge. In criticizing this pretty idea and other generalizations of the same kind, Brunhes makes a remark which we may well regard as the text of his entire work: "Truth," he says, "is more delicate than this, more subtly nuanced. Geology and physical geography certainly aid in explaining human geography and history, but they do not fatally determine them. One is almost tempted to recall an expression of Pascal and to say that the two latter sciences belong to a wholly different 'order' from the former."

In much the same spirit Brunhes attacks the "simplifiers" among the historians, who have conceived of the history of France as conditioned by a gigantic and continuous struggle between opposing races. "Human facts are more complicated than an oversimple archeology and history have often depicted them for us." He criticizes attempts made in the past to mark off by a sharp line on the map the boundary between the territories of the *langue d'oc* and the *langue d'oïl* and explains how recent studies have shown that "the reality is much too complex to be expressed by a simple line of separation." A map is supplied to illustrate how in reality one dialect merges into the other.

The same underlying motive—which, perhaps, marks a reaction against that sometimes exaggerated love of logical classification and arrangement so characteristic of the French—led Brunhes to turn his back on the regional method of treatment. For many years after the middle of the eighteenth century French geographical thought was held captive by the theory that the hydrographic basins of rivers form veritable geographic units. Though this might be true in some cases, it was finally perceived that many river systems are entirely lacking in geographic homogeneity, as is notably the case with the Loire and the Rhine. Geographers then came to regard countries "as being constituted of divers *regions* which they wished violently to cut off one from the other." The importance of natural regions was, in Brunhes' opinion, exaggerated; and too much of the idea of watertight compartments entered into geographic description. In his own work he takes a middle course between those who overemphasized the importance of river systems and those who overemphasized the importance of regions.

The rivers serve him as convenient connecting threads (*fils conducteurs*) for a preliminary and relatively brief regional description of the whole of France, introductory to the comparative studies that form the main part of the book.

Theorists, Brunhes complains, have been prone to urge a radical administrative reorganization of the nation into "regions" of their own devising. He was, however, ready to admit that the organization by *départements* leaves much to be desired and, in the Epilogue to the volume before us, suggests a governing principle that should be kept in view in any future subdivision of France. The great mistake in the past has been the advocacy of administrative regions of homogeneous character. "The region of the future ought not to be specialized in the narrow sense of the word but should be founded

on an adaptation to natural and human conditions which will—if we may be permitted a technical term of modern industrial economy—orient it towards *integration*.” Diversity, rather than uniformity, will in the long run produce the greatest richness of provincial life both spiritual and material.

Brunhes' main contribution to human geography has been the study of the tangible and material modifications which man has made of the earth's surface by building houses, farms, roads, villages, cities. The study of the human habitation as a geographic element is being pursued more vigorously in France than elsewhere, probably on account of the great variety of habitation types that exist in that country. We may, perhaps, take exception to Brunhes' remark that of all the “essential facts by which man's activity is written upon the earth's skin” (*faits essentiels par lesquels l'activité des hommes s'inscrit sur l'épiderme terrestre*) the house is the most geographic and most characteristic. Certainly the same general type of habitation—house and barn—is found throughout the farming districts of the northern United States under widely varying conditions of physiographic environment and ethnic tradition. In Europe, on the other hand, with its infinite variety in the forms of habitation, Brunhes' words hold good. One may fall into the pitfall of over-easy generalization in dealing with habitations: one is often tempted to jump at the conclusion that the form of house, arrangement of stables, granges, outlying buildings, etc. are inevitably a direct result of the type of agriculture carried on and that this in its turn is the immediate result of the nature of the ground and of the climate. This is undeniably true in some parts of France: in Rouergue, for instance, there are three kinds of soil, three types of agriculture, and three types of habitation—all corresponding very neatly to one another. On the other hand, Brunhes shows us that in Flanders a sharp boundary line between two areas of different types of habitation is determined not at all by physiographic, but by ethnographic, differences on either side of the line. There are two distinct forms of roof construction in France, steep roofs and flat roofs: the steep roofs have been said to be characteristic of the rainy climate of the north; the flat roofs of the dry climate of the south. Brunhes has tested the application of this statement by drawing a map of the roof forms throughout the country. This shows that, whereas in a very general way flat roofs prevail in the south and are characteristic of Mediterranean conditions, and steep roofs prevail in the north, there are many exceptions to the rule. Large areas in the southern Massif Central have steep roofs, and there is a great island of flat-roof country between Châlons-sur-Marne and Épinal. The details of this distribution, he concludes, have been determined entirely by historical causes and do not in any way reflect local climatic or physiographic conditions.